

History of Guide Dog Use by Veterans

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ABSTRACT The first guide dog school was established in Germany during World War I to care for German soldiers blinded in that war. Other schools in Germany followed. Observation by an American at one of the schools led to the creation of the first guide dog school in the United States in 1929, "The Seeing Eye." Additional U.S. schools were opened during and after World War II. This article discusses the history of guide dog use by veterans, including the formation of the first guide dog schools in response to aiding blinded servicemen, and the involvement of federal agencies and guide dog schools in providing assistance to blinded veterans.

INTRODUCTION

The blind man and his dog were familiar figures in earlier times, with the blind man generally being poor and a beggar at street corners.¹ The image now is much different, with guide dogs and their blind partners traveling freely, safely, and confidently. Before and during World War I guide dogs were not used by blind Americans to aid in their mobility and independence. Initially the guide dog movement began in Germany during the middle of World War I when the first school opened its doors. The guide dog movement in the United States would not begin until more than a dozen years later, but was influenced by the German effort to care for their blinded World War I veterans. The movement in America was further influenced by the start of World War II. Whether blinded from war, accidents, or more commonly from eye disease, eligible veterans today receive help from the Veterans Administration as well as nonprofit guide dog schools in assisting them to obtain guide dogs.

WORLD WAR I

During the First World War, the German army relied heavily on the use of German shepherds as ambulance and messenger dogs. The Germans reportedly used more than 25,000 dogs during World War I.¹ These dogs were ideally suited for this type of work, with well-known traits such as trainability, loyalty, intelligence, strength, and endurance.

Also during World War I, many German soldiers were returning from the battlefield blinded, sometimes due to poison gas. In April 1915, after 6 months of the war, the number of blinded soldiers in Germany (not including Saxony, Württemberg, and Bavaria), was said to be 300.² Approximately 5 to 8% of wounds incurred by German soldiers during the war involved the eyes.²

On one particular day during the war, while walking through the grounds of a veteran's hospital, Dr. Gerhard Stalling left his German shepherd with one of his patients, and when he returned he noticed that his dog seemed to be helping the blind veteran. Dr. Stalling subsequently became inter-

ested in training German shepherds to serve as guides, and in 1916 he opened the world's first guide dog school, located in Oldenburg, Germany. Other branches opened throughout Germany, including locations in Bonn, Breslau, Dresden, Essen, Freiburg, Hamburg, Hannover, Magdeburg, Munster, and Württemberg. Following the war, schools to train dogs as guides were established at Munich and Potsdam, and by 1927, an estimated 4,000 Germans were using guide dogs.^{3,4} Lack of funding and economic realities after the war forced some of the early schools to close their doors. The Potsdam school located near Berlin, however, was proving to be very successful, and it would come to have a major influence on establishing the first guide dog school in the United States.

In America, following World War I, the Evergreen School (U.S. Army General Hospital no. 7) in Baltimore became the center for re-education of war-blinded soldiers.⁵ In a 1919 survey taken of 115 patients at the school, 70 of the patients had been blinded by high explosives, 12 by machine-gun or rifle bullets, 6 by gas, 5 from epidemic meningitis, 5 from syphilis, and 17 from other causes.⁶ Evergreen school, in addition to providing hospital and purely medical care for the men, also carried out an extensive educational and rehabilitation program.⁶ Evergreen was turned over to the Red Cross in 1919, and the Veteran's Bureau operated the hospital from June 1922 until it closed June 1, 1925.⁷ About one-half of all American troops who suffered from eye wounds or impairment of eyesight during World War I as a result of trench warfare, were treated at Evergreen.⁷ The use of guide dogs to guide blind American veterans would not be considered until the late 1920s.

FORTUNATE FIELDS

While living in America, Dorothy Eustis had a German shepherd named Hans von Saarbrücken, which she had brought over from Germany in 1914. She had the opportunity to observe Hans for nearly 10 years and wondered why this particular dog was so intelligent and quick to learn, but also had such a nice disposition. She had also wondered whether some of the traits in other dogs of his type could be further developed by formalized training and selective breeding. In 1923, Dorothy Eustis and her husband George decided to leave the U.S. and start an experimental training center at their second

VA Southern Oregon Rehabilitation Center and Clinics, 8495 Crater Lake Hwy., White City, OR 97503.



FIGURE 1. Dorothy and George Eustis with students at Fortunate Fields, mid to late 1920s (photo courtesy of The Seeing Eye archives).

home near Vevey, Switzerland (Fig. 1). By the time the program was finished, more than 750 puppies and dogs came under scrutiny, study, and development in this effort to breed teachable animals, an effort that was later named “Fortunate Fields.”¹ The couple traveled to farms in Switzerland and Germany to look for desirable dogs and brought them back for training and breeding. In addition to the typical canine qualities of loyalty, affection, and devotion, they were looking for dogs that were particularly keen, alert, and eager to learn. Fortunate Fields’ aim was to produce a superior working dog, one that would have not only the necessary physical attributes, but would also be temperamentally suited for the various services in which it could be effective in aiding people.¹

In 1926, The Swiss state police asked Fortunate Fields to provide them with dogs trained to help their police officers. One of their dogs, named Wigger, became well known for tracking and finding missing persons, and in his time he tracked down more than 50 criminals.⁴ Tales of Wigger’s prowess crossed the Atlantic, and when they reached an ear of an editor in Philadelphia, he asked Dorothy Eustis to write an article for the *Saturday Evening Post*.⁴ The Swiss Army service was also using dogs trained to act as Red Cross dogs, communications dogs, and military patrol dogs. In 1928 the Swiss Army had become aware of Fortunate Fields’ success with police dogs, and asked them to provide dogs trained for army communications work. One of Fortunate Fields’ dogs was trained to lay telephone wire for the communications unit. This particular dog, named Khedive, became such an expert at his task that he could lay a kilometer of telephone wire in 5 minutes and 10 seconds.¹

Away from Fortunate Fields, George Eustis happened upon the guide dog training center in Potsdam, Germany. He observed the dogs guiding blind war veterans, and then notified his wife, who came to Potsdam to observe. After watching the dogs work, Dorothy Eustis was amazed at what she had seen. She had finally found an occupation worthy of the quali-

ties of her own German shepherd Hans, and she felt that surely there was no greater service a dog could render than this.¹ She felt that others should know of this discovery in Potsdam.

THE SEEING EYE

Dorothy Eustis wrote an essay one night and forwarded it to the *Saturday Evening Post*. Instead of writing about Fortunate Fields and Wigger’s legendary trailing feats, she decided on the story of what the Germans had done for their war blind.⁴ She titled the essay “The Seeing Eye,” a name that eventually would become famous. The essay was published on November 5, 1927. The first reply that Dorothy Eustis received was from Morris Frank, a 20-year-old blind man who was living in Nashville, Tennessee. In the letter, Morris Frank indicated that he would like to help start a similar school in America. Morris Frank traveled to Fortunate Fields in April 1928 for training with a guide dog. The dog Fortunate Fields chose for him was named Kiss, which Morris Frank promptly changed to Buddy after their first meeting. Buddy was well tempered, intelligent, and had a quality of imperturbability, which Fortunate Fields felt would be necessary to handle the difficulties that would present to Morris Frank when he returned to the United States.¹ After 5 weeks of training, Morris Frank and Buddy were ready for their return to the States. The task that awaited them was to convince the American public that a guide dog could indeed guide a blind person safely, confidently, and in a way that would command respect. If the two were successful, then creating a school in America might become possible.

A short time after returning to America, Morris Frank felt he had achieved success and wrote Mrs. Eustis that the time had come to start a school in the United States (Fig. 2). Fortunate Fields replied that they would have two dogs ready by February 1929, with five more ready for March.¹ The Seeing Eye opened in 1929 in Nashville, Tennessee, with Morris Frank as managing director and Dorothy Eustis as president. Two years later, in 1931, the headquarters moved to Morristown, NJ. In 1938, Buddy died of cancer, and Morris Frank received a replacement Seeing Eye dog, which he named Buddy II.

The day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the board of trustees of The Seeing Eye issued a resolution stating that they would provide Seeing Eye dog guides for eligible veterans who had lost their sight in the line of duty, giving these veterans priority over all other applicants for guide dogs.⁸

In 1943 and 1944, Morris Frank and Buddy II engaged in a nationwide tour of Army and Navy general hospitals, speaking to doctors, nurses, and other personnel at 94 hospitals.⁹ The purpose of the hospital visits was to help blinded veterans become accustomed to their blindness and to give advice to hospital staff on how to work with blind patients. The tour was carried out in cooperation with the surgeons general of the Army, the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery of the Navy, and the director of the Veterans Administration.⁹

By the time Dorothy Eustis died in 1946 at the age of 60, The Seeing Eye had supplied close to a thousand blind



FIGURE 2. Morris Frank and Buddy crossing a city street after returning to America, 1928 (photo courtesy of The Seeing Eye archives).

Americans with working dogs.¹⁰ By 1950, the Seeing Eye had provided guide dogs for 163 veterans.¹¹ One of these veterans was PFC Yoshina Omiya, who was blinded in Italy on November 5, 1943, when a soldier next to him tripped over a wire that exploded a land mine. His Army unit (the 442nd Regimental Combat team) was composed of Americans of Japanese ancestry and was the most decorated military unit of World War II.⁸ Omiya began training at The Seeing Eye in December 1944, and graduated 6 weeks later with his guide dog, Audrey.

PROLIFERATION OF GUIDE DOG SCHOOLS IN THE 1940S

World War II would lead to a major increase in the number of guide dog schools in the United States. Leader Dogs for the Blind was founded in 1939, Guide Dogs for the Blind in 1942, Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind in 1946, and International Guiding Eyes (name later changed to Guide Dogs of America) in 1948. By the mid 1940s there were 27 guide dog schools operating in the United States, 19 of them in California alone.¹⁰ Most of these were one- or two-person operations, launched by dog breeders and others to take advantage of wartime emotions and of new federal law, which appropriated funds to supply war-blinded veterans with dogs.¹⁰

GUIDE DOGS FOR THE BLIND

Lois Merrihew had been fascinated by the idea of training dogs to guide the blind ever since she was a young girl, and in

1941 she teamed up with Don Donaldson, who was 1 of only 10 guide dog instructors in the nation.¹² Lois Merrihew had been told that women were not hired as trainers, as they were not considered physically or emotionally fit for such work, and this only strengthened her resolve to become a guide dog trainer.¹³ Lois Merrihew and Don Donaldson were hoping to create their own school on the West Coast. The two received some unexpected publicity in October 1941, when a picture was taken of a blindfolded Lois Merrihew being led down the marble stairway of the Sir Francis Drake Hotel by her German shepherd dog Blondie. The picture appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on October 21, 1941, and the accompanying story announced that Mr. Donaldson was seeking contributions for a school to be founded in the San Francisco area.¹² Less than 2 months later, Pearl Harbor was bombed. One day later, on December 8, 1941, Miss Merrihew and Mr. Donaldson visited Letterman Army Medical Hospital in San Francisco to offer their services to a wartime organization known as American Women's Volunteer Services (AWVS). The AWVS was instrumental in the founding of Guide Dogs for the Blind to aid blinded veterans.¹³ Guide Dogs for the Blind would become incorporated on May 27, 1942 and operated from a rented house in Los Gatos, California. The campus would later move to its present location in San Rafael, California in 1947.¹³ The graduation for the first class was on June 1, 1942 and consisted of two students. The third class, held in September/October 1943, included the school's first World War II veteran, Sgt. Leonard Foulk, who had lost his sight at the battle of Attu.^{12,13} During Guide Dogs for the Blind's first 2 years, 27 dogs had been given to graduates, including three veterans.¹²

In 1947 the California Legislature established a State Guide Dog Board to enforce high standards of guide dog training through the licensing of all instructors in the state. Lois Merrihew was the first woman in the nation to become a licensed guide dog trainer, and helped to get Senate Bill no. 2391 passed in 1947, which set standards and licensing for both trainers and schools. Before then, anyone could "train" and sell dogs to blind persons, without any guarantee of proper training.¹³ The new licensing requirements in 1947 were so strict that 16 of the 19 California schools soon disappeared.¹⁰

In 1949 the 100th guide dog team graduated from Guide Dogs for the Blind. William F. Johns, former assistant director of the Army K-9 Corps, directed the school for the next 20 years.¹³

SGT. LEONARD FOULK

Approximately 1,400 U.S. veterans were blinded with service-incurred disabilities during World War II.¹⁴ At the battle of Attu in 1943, Sgt. Leonard Foulk was with his advancing unit when they were fired upon by Japanese machine guns. During the battle, a bullet shattered Sgt. Foulk's binoculars and destroyed his eyes. The battle of Attu would end about 24 hours later.¹⁵ Medics brought him to the first-aid station where he remained for 5 days. He was placed on a ship for



FIGURE 3. Sgt. Leonard Foulk receiving Purple Heart at Letterman Army Hospital on 24th day of blindness, 1943 (photo courtesy of Guide Dogs for the Blind).

transport back to the United States, and during the trip he was operated on and his right eye removed. He would be without vision the rest of his life. Twelve days after the injury he arrived at Letterman General Hospital in San Francisco (Fig. 3). In his book “Still My World,” Sgt. Foulk states “The doctors at Letterman were especially sympathetic and understanding of my needs, and it was under these physicians that I was to receive further medical attention. Again I knew I was in skilled hands, and each day appreciated more the personal interest they showed me, realizing Uncle Sam was giving me the best of results through their effort and skill.”¹⁵ With the encouragement of one particular case worker, Sgt. Foulk soon began the process of learning how to get around without being able to see, and she planted in his mind the idea of partnering with a guide dog. After being discharged from Letterman and traveling back to Illinois to visit with family, Sgt. Foulk returned to California for training to receive a guide dog from Guide Dogs for the Blind. After a month of training, he graduated with Blondie, the dog Lois Merrihew had originally rescued from a Pasadena pound and who had served as her guide in early fundraising and publicity demonstrations (Fig. 4).¹² In December 1944, Sgt. Foulk was awarded the Bronze Star for extreme bravery in action for saving the lives of his mortar division during that battle (Fig. 5).¹²

MILITARY AND VA CARE FOR BLINDED WORLD WAR II VETERANS

In 1943, there were two Army general hospitals designated for ophthalmic surgery and treatment of blinded casualties: Letterman Army Hospital in San Francisco, and Valley Forge General Hospital in Phoenixville, PA.¹⁶ In 1944, the responsibility for rehabilitation of blinded soldiers moved from



FIGURE 4. Sgt. Leonard Foulk with his guide dog Blondie (photo courtesy of Guide Dogs for the Blind).

Letterman Army Hospital to Dibble General Hospital in Menlo Park, CA.

On January 8, 1944, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an executive order declaring “No blinded servicemen from World War II would be returning to their homes without adequate training to meet the problems of necessity imposed upon them by their blindness.”¹⁷ To meet the demands of this obligation, it was determined that the social adjustment training of blinded soldiers would become the military’s duty, whereas the Veterans Administration would assume responsibility for any vocational training.¹⁷

The Army Medical Corps operated three major rehabilitation programs for patients with serious eye disabilities. Two of these programs were concurrent with definitive medical treatment, Valley Forge General Hospital and Dibble Army General Hospital.¹⁴ Preliminary blind rehabilitation took place at the two hospitals while the veterans were undergoing medical and surgical care. The next phase in the rehabilitation program was at Old Farms Convalescent Hospital in Avon, Connecticut. Patients were sent there from both Dibble and Valley Forge, and the program consisted of an 18-week personal and social adjustment rehabilitation training course.¹⁷ The Navy operated another special blind program for sailors and naval officers at the Philadelphia Naval Hospital, with the assistance of the New York Institute for the Blind.¹⁴ The last



FIGURE 5. Sgt. Leonard Foulk (with Blondie) receiving Bronze Star Medal at Presidio, San Francisco, December 1944 (photo courtesy of Guide Dogs for the Blind).

phase, vocational training and placement, was the responsibility of the Veterans Administration.¹⁷

Since private guide dog agencies were providing guide dogs to soldiers during World War II for little or no cost, it was felt that government aid in supplying the dogs would not be required.¹⁸ Legislation was enacted during the war which permitted guide dogs to be furnished to veterans and stipulated that veterans would be provided the necessary travel expenses to and from their places of residence to the point where adjustment to the guide dog was available.¹⁹ Meals and lodging during the period of adjustment would be provided while the veteran was away from his residence during the training period.¹⁹

On May 28, 1947, President Harry Truman signed a presidential order transferring responsibility for the social adjustment training of blinded servicemen from the Army to the Veterans Administration.¹⁴ Within a month of the presidential order, all wartime rehabilitation programs for blinded servicemen were deactivated by the armed services.¹⁷ The Hines Veterans Administration Hospital in Chicago, Illinois, was selected as the first VA Blind Rehabilitation Center because a large and effective service was already functioning there.^{14,17} Russel C. Williams, a blinded World War II veteran, was appointed chief of the new Blind Rehabilitation Center.¹⁷

In a survey of 1,949 blinded veterans living outside of VA hospitals or domiciliaries, with service-connected disabilities incurred between December 7, 1941 and March 31, 1953, there were 770 veterans using a cane for mobility, 586 veter-

ans were able to read Braille, 691 veterans had plastic eyes, and 144 of the veterans were using a guide dog.²⁰

GUIDE DOGS FOR BLIND VETERANS AFTER WORLD WAR II AND INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

New guide dog schools have opened during the last half of the 20th century, including Pilot Dogs (1950), Eye Dog Foundation for the Blind (1952), Eye of the Pacific Guide Dogs (1955), Guiding Eyes for the Blind (1956), Fidelco Guide Dog Foundation (1960), Guide Dogs of the Desert (1972), Southeastern Guide Dogs (1982), Guide Dogs of Texas (1989), Kansas Specialty Dog Service (1990), and Freedom Guide Dogs for the Blind (1992). In 1995, Guide Dogs for the Blind (headquarters in San Rafael, California), opened a second campus near Portland, Oregon. All of the schools provide services to veterans as well as civilians, usually at little or no cost to the applicants.

The provision of VA services for blind veterans has also grown substantially since the 1940s. In 1967, the Veterans Administration established visually impaired service teams to help coordinate outpatient services for eligible blinded veterans. After Hines VA Blind Rehabilitation Center opened in the late 1940s, nine additional VA blind rehabilitation centers were established in Palo Alto, California (1967), West Haven, Connecticut (1969), American Lake, Washington (1971), Waco, Texas (1974), Birmingham, Alabama (1982), San Juan, Puerto Rico (1990), Tucson, Arizona (1994), Augusta, Georgia (1996), and West Palm Beach, Florida (2000).

Demographics of blinded veterans have also changed considerably since the 1940s, with an increase in the number of veterans going blind from eye disease. More than 165,000 blind or visually impaired veterans now live among us, and each year some 7,000 veterans become newly blind or visually impaired due to age-related macular degeneration, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, and other diseases.²¹

The number of veterans currently using a guide dog is difficult to estimate, as the Veterans Administration does not track that statistic. The VA can monitor requests for veterinary treatment of guide dogs. When contacted, a program analyst for VA central office determined that 214 veterans received VA authorized veterinary treatment for their guide dogs in fiscal year 2009, and that approximately 300 guide dogs have received care since 2005. Some guide dog schools keep track of how many veterans receive guide dogs, and some schools do not. When contacted independently, 7 of 14 guide dog schools were able to report the number of veterans graduating in 2009. The 7 schools reported that 44 of the 725 guide dogs were paired with veterans. A total of 1,487 guide dog teams graduated from the 14 U.S. schools in 2009 (some counting fiscal year instead of calendar year), which suggests that the overall number of veterans receiving a guide dog in 2009 was approximately 90. On one particular day in 2009, Guide Dogs of the Desert had an all-veteran graduating class, pairing 5 veterans with guide dogs on 4/5/09 (Fig. 6).

For veterans that are currently interested in getting a guide dog, assessment for orientation and mobility is done first. If



FIGURE 6. All-Veterans class of April 5, 2009 with guide dogs Pearl (named in honor of the crew of the USS Pearl Harbor), Waldo, Eugene, Shep, and Zihn (photo courtesy of Guide Dogs of the Desert).

a guide dog is indicated or preferred, information on how to contact guide dog schools is provided. Requirements for obtaining a guide dog are as follows: “Guide dogs may be authorized for issuance to eligible veterans who are enrolled under 38 U.S.C. Chapter 17, Section 1705, and the guide dogs must be obtained through private agencies as the VA does not pay for the animal itself. Each request from an eligible veteran for a guide dog must be subject to the requirements of that guide dog agency. If the veteran appears to be a good candidate for the use of a guide dog, the request, with all pertinent information needs to be forwarded to the guide dog agency concerned. Forms may be obtained from the guide dog agency or local VA medical center. Travel arrangements will be made through the chief business office or equivalent office at the local VA medical center. If the veteran becomes adjusted to a guide dog, it will be explained to the veteran that the dog is the veteran’s property and that the veteran is responsible for procuring and paying for license tags (if required), food, and for liability of any damages inflicted by the dog to others. Veterinary treatment and harness repairs may be authorized as repair services under the authority of a PSC or VA form 10-2421.”²²

Actual or perceived barriers for veterans who wish to obtain a guide dog include training costs, time away from home or work, age concerns, and increased responsibility of caring for a service animal. Some schools have upper age limits, but others have no age limit as long as the applicant has adequate health and stamina to work with a guide dog. Veterans may be surprised to find out that most if not all of the cost of obtaining a guide dog is provided either by the VA or guide dog school itself. Once a guide dog has been received, there will be recurring food, grooming, licensing, and veterinary costs, but the VA may authorize veterinary treatment, and many schools offer their own veterinary assistance programs. Schools continue to support and keep in close contact with their graduates and may provide emergency home visits if serious issues or

concerns arise. Time away from home or work can be a significant concern as training with a guide dog typically lasts 4 weeks. Some schools offer shorter and more condensed training programs of 2 to 3 weeks, and other schools even offer specialized in-home training with a guide dog for those applicants that qualify.

The cost of raising a guide dog by the nonprofit guide dog schools is very high, so a lot of effort goes into making sure the veteran and his/her guide dog will be successful once they graduate. In his “Open Letter to Blinded Veterans,” Major General Don Harlin (retired Air Force Chaplain) states, “About the application process, let me say this about it: It is thorough. But they make every effort possible to determine that a dog is needed, wanted, will be used as intended, and cared for conscientiously and lovingly.”²³ After losing his vision and not being able to drive secondary to macular degeneration, Major General Harlin contacted his VIST coordinator at a nearby VA medical center and was then referred for 10 weeks of training at the VA Southwest Blind Rehabilitation Center in Tucson, Arizona. After applying to get a guide dog and being interviewed at his home, he then traveled to Guide Dogs for the Blind in San Rafael for 1 month of intensive (tailored to his needs) training with a guide dog. Major General Harlin and his yellow Lab Goldie graduated from the program together in 2002. As the national chaplain for the Air Force Association he has addressed many large events, with Goldie as his guide. They have conducted four funerals together at Arlington National Cemetery, including one for his own son who had been an Air Force pilot. In his open letter, Major General Harlin states that Goldie is his key to safety, mobility, and independence, and says “Getting a guide dog was among the best decisions I ever made. If you can qualify, and have what it takes, I strongly recommend it.”²³

CONCLUSION

Guide dog use by veterans in the United States is linked to the original training schools set up in Germany to care for World War I veterans, the observation of those training principles and further work done by Dorothy Eustis and Fortunate Fields to establish the first guide dog school in America, and creation of additional schools during the 1940s to help care for blinded World War II veterans. Today there are approximately 10,000 active guide dog teams in the United States, with more than a dozen schools providing guide dog services to blind civilians and veterans. More than 80 years ago, Morris Frank and Buddy demonstrated to Americans that a dog could guide a blind person safely and confidently. Since then the military and more recently the Veterans Administration have been involved in referring blinded veterans for guide dog services. The VA has expanded blind rehabilitation services for veterans and continues to provide resources to eligible veterans to obtain training with a guide dog, once it has been determined that a guide dog would be appropriate to meet the veterans needs. Guide dog schools continue to maintain their close partnership with

blinded veterans, by providing training and dogs at virtually no cost to veterans, along with continued support services to help the teams adjust to new challenges. The use of guide dogs continues to be a viable option for many of our nation's blind veterans.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Seeing Eye, Guide Dogs for the Blind, and Guide Dogs of the Desert all contributed photos to accompany this article. Photo courtesies are indicated in the caption of each photo.

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